

Immorality East and West:  
Are Immoral Behaviors Especially Harmful, or Especially Uncivilized?

Emma E. Buchtel

The Hong Kong Institute of Education  
Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China

Yanjun Guan

University of Surrey  
Guildford, United Kingdom

Qin Peng and Yanjie Su

Peking University  
Beijing, People's Republic of China

Biao Sang

East China Normal University  
Shanghai, People's Republic of China

Sylvia Xiaohua Chen and Michael Harris Bond

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University  
Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China

**Word count:** 6,388 (including tables and figures, abstract, text, and references)

**Corresponding author:**

Emma E. Buchtel

Department of Psychological Studies, The Hong Kong Institute of Education

10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, Hong Kong SAR

buchtel@ied.edu.hk

**Declaration of Conflict of Interest:**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship or publication of this article.

**Financial disclosure/funding:**

This research was supported in part by grant #G-YX2U from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, grants RG55/2010-2011 and RG19/2011-2012R from the Hong Kong Institute of Education, and grant ECS 859813 from the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong University Grants Committee.

**Author Notes:**

Grateful acknowledgement for assistance with data collection, entry, and coding is given to Paul Wagland, Wajma Ebrahimi, and Colin Wastell of Macquarie University; Taylor Davis and Ara Norenzayan of the University of British Columbia; Claire Wai Ting Au and Candy Ho Yee Tang, Hong Kong Polytechnic University; Cindy Xiaocen Liu, Ludan Zhang, Mingwei Ma, and Yang Lu, East China Normal University; and Jane Yee Han Li, Qiyun Zhang, Huixin Ma, Ka Po Yu, Wen Lei, Xinyi Shen, Jingwen Xing, Jessica Ka Hing Wong, Mena Ning Wang, Zhou Lin, and Jiaxin Liu, Hong Kong Institute of Education.



### Abstract

What makes some act immoral? While Western theories of morality often define harmful behaviors as centrally immoral, whether or not this is applicable to other cultures is still under debate. In particular, Confucianism emphasizes civilized behavior as fundamental to moral excellence. We designed three studies examining how the word “immoral” is used by Chinese and Westerners. Layperson-generated examples were used to examine cultural differences in which behaviors are called “immoral” (Study 1, N = 609; Study 2, N = 480), and whether “immoral” behaviors were best characterized as particularly harmful vs. uncivilized (Study 3, N = 443). Results suggest that Chinese use the word “immoral” to label behaviors that are particularly uncivilized, while Westerners link immorality more tightly to harm. More research into lay concepts of morality is needed to inform theories of moral cognition and improve understanding of human conceptualizations of social norms.

*Keywords:* morality; culture; lay prototypes; lay concepts; virtue ethics; deontology

### Immorality East and West:

#### Are Immoral Behaviors Especially Harmful, or Especially Uncivilized?

When do we judge some act to be immoral? “Moral norms” are proposed to be universal and unique: invoking a special type of norm cognition (Sachdeva, Singh, & Medin, 2011; Skitka, 2010; Turiel, 1983), and with distinct social and evolutionary functions (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Krebs, 2008). The definition of moral cognition and function, however, depends on another definitional issue: the *content* of moral norms— what kinds of behaviors are immoral? The classic moral-conventional distinction— that issues of harm, fairness and justice distinguish moral from non-moral issues (Turiel, 1983)— has been challenged by the more pluralistic Moral Foundation, Three Ethics, and Relationship Regulation Theory approaches, which argue that different cultural groups may hold a variety of moral principles (e.g. Graham et al., 2011; Haidt & Graham, 2009; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). And yet the search for unified and universal moral principles continues, such as with the recent Moral Dyad proposal that the perception of harm and suffering may be a universal template for all moral judgments (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014; Gray, Young, & Waytz, 2012; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013).

To understand what characterizes morality, especially cross-culturally, it is important to study what humans judge to be morally relevant (Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). In this paper, we examine the lay concept of “immoral behavior” in Chinese and Western cultures. In contrast to the West, Chinese morality places unusual emphasis on being civilized and cultured. We ask two questions: First, what behaviors do Chinese and Western laypeople call “immoral”? And second, are the acts they call “immoral” characterized by their harmfulness, or by their incivility? We will argue that the data support a pluralistic approach to morality, i.e. that the principles that characterize moral issues do differ culturally. But the Chinese lay concept of immoral acts leads to surprising

inconsistencies with traditional conceptualizations of moral psychology. This better understanding of the category of “moral violations” in Chinese leads to questions about the psychological definition of morality in general.

### **Chinese Morality: Being a Cultured Person**

China’s Confucian-influenced moral tradition is an important counterpart to the moral traditions of the West. Much post-Enlightenment Western moral philosophy as well as recent moral psychology has focused on “deontological” ethics, in which “moral obligations” are understood to be inescapable, fact-like requirements for behavior which can be generalized to other situations.

In contrast, Confucianism is a form of “virtue ethics” (Angle & Slote, 2013), in which the cultivation of good character is seen as the key source of moral behavior (Hursthouse, 2013; Wong, 2013). In particular, it is through the practice of courteous behavior toward others that one can develop and refine one’s character (Cua, 2007; Rosemont & Ames, 2008; Wong, 2014). One of the central virtues of Confucian ethics, “ritual propriety” (*li*), is the ability to act with decorum and respect in a variety of situations and social roles (Sarkissian, 2014), and is commonly perceived as central to moral education (Bakken, 2000). Importantly, the specific ritual behavior one should observe (such as bowing vs. shaking hands; Fingarette, 1972) changes depending on context; but this variable behavior is, ideally, consistently appropriate and attentive, motivated by virtuous character (Sarkissian, 2014; Wong, 2014). This philosophical position is echoed in research on East Asian self-concept and personality expression, in which Chinese and Japanese participants have been found to be less consistent across social situations, though as consistent within them, compared to North American participants (Heine & Buchtel, 2009; see also Hwang, 2012; Yang, 2009) .

Confucianism can thus be seen as a form of interpersonal duty-based, rather than rights-based, morality (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Dworkin, 1978; Miller & Bersoff, 1994;

Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990) with an important caveat: rather than focusing on absolute and abstract obligations, it elaborates on the importance of a cultured, cultivated character, sublimely attentive to the social requirements of the situation, as the guide of virtuous and appropriate behavior. A corollary to this moral focus on character cultivation is that Chinese law has historically separated morality from law, seeing criminal law (and not morality) as a motivational tool applicable only to deviants whose behavior falls well beyond the bounds of civility and who are unmotivated by the search for virtue (Bakken, 2000; A. H.-Y. Chen, 2011). Virtuous character is shown in small daily actions rather than avoidance of serious crimes.

Chinese moral education has been effectively synonymous with Confucian moral education for more than 2000 years (Li, Zhong, Lin, & Zhang, 2004), and even now Confucian values influence the mandatory moral education courses in both primary and secondary schools in Mainland China (Reed, 1995; Zhan & Ning, 2004), both in inculcating specific virtues such as filial piety but also in a general emphasis on cultivation of moral character and appropriateness. For example, contemporary policies on moral education in Mainland China emphasize cultivation and civility: “The fundamental task of ... moral education work is to cultivate students as citizens who... have public morality and civilized behavior and customs” (Article 5, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2006).

### **Civility vs. Harm as Morally Relevant**

Influenced by a culturally based moral emphasis on character cultivation, Chinese lay moral cognition may be closely tied to judgments of civility and politeness. In particular, issues of harm, rights, and freedom infringement may not be closely associated with Chinese “moral” considerations. This would be in contrast to both classic and recent psychology theories of morality which argue that moral judgment is universally based on perceptions of

harm and suffering, justice and fairness (Gray et al., 2014; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Royzman, Leeman, & Baron, 2009; Turiel, 1983). For example, Gray et al. (2014) have recently argued that accounts of moral instincts apparently founded on other principles (purity, loyalty, etc.) can be ultimately explained as concerns about harm.

Culture-minded psychologists have argued that these theories reflect a Western cultural bias; the “thinner and less binding morality” of modern *Gesellschaft* cultures (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010, p. 800), where communal and hierarchical relationships are less emphasized (Rai & Fiske, 2011), may have led to a moral emphasis on harm and unjust infringement of others’ basic individual rights. In non-Western cultures, other issues might be perceived as more relevant to moral judgment (Graham et al., 2011; Haidt & Joseph, 2007; Rai & Fiske, 2011; Shweder et al., 1997). Might immorality and harm be most strongly linked in the minds of those influenced by Western cultures, while those influenced by Chinese cultures have stronger non-harm-based conceptions of morality?

### **Moral vs. Non-Moral Norms: A Prototype Approach**

The moralization of a behavior is assumed to be the first step in evoking the specific mental processes of moral cognition (Monin et al., 2007; Rozin, 1999). Moral norms may be distinguishable from norms about “aesthetic, religious, legal, or economic judgments” (Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2013, p. 2), from conventions or issues of personal choice (Turiel, 1983), or behavior prohibited because it is imprudent or irrational (Machery & Mallon, 2010). Psychologists concerned with the identification of moral norms have used different theoretical models to guide their search. Deontologically-oriented researchers have searched for acts perceived as “objectively obligated” (DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013; Miller et al., 1990; Shweder, 1990; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987) or those additionally justified by “concepts of welfare, justice, and rights” (Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987, p. 169-170). A social-functional perspective looks for evolutionarily-based social and psychological



mechanisms that produce prosocial outcomes (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010), especially those associated with automatic affective evaluations (Graham et al., 2013). Others have emphasized the communicative and meaning-making aspects of morality, both intra- and inter-individual (e.g., Haste, 2013; Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2011; Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013; van den Bos, 2009).

How do laypeople distinguish between “moral” and “nonmoral” norm violations? Laypeople may note a behavior’s similarity to prototypical immoral acts, rather than abstract definitions (Rosch, 1975). The prototype approach proposes that lay, natural language concepts are defined by a mental network of prototypical and less-prototypical examples, rather than being defined by abstract, clear-cut criteria (Rosch, 1975). No published studies have yet reported lay prototypes of immoral acts, though prototypes of other concepts have been shown to affect cognition and reveal dimensions not predicted by theory (e.g., Fehr, 1988; Fontaine, Poortinga, Setiadi, & Markam, 2002; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Smith, Smith, & Christopher, 2007; Walker & Pitts, 1998).

Given the ongoing debate about how to theoretically define moral norms, and especially the potential inapplicability of deontological definitions to Chinese virtue ethics, a prototype approach can provide new data on what Chinese and Western people judge to be a “moral issue.” In this case, we are interested in what is most prototypical of the natural language category “immoral.” The current studies thus use Western and Chinese layperson-generated examples of “immoral” behaviors to examine what is most typical of this lay concept, and what characterizes immorality, in the minds of these participants.

### **The Current Studies**

Three studies test the hypotheses that: a) compared to Chinese, Western laypeople are more likely to identify harmful behaviors as typically immoral, while Chinese are more likely to identify uncivilized behaviors as typically immoral; and b) a higher degree of harmfulness

distinguishes Western immoral behaviors from other kinds of unacceptable behaviors, but Chinese immoral behaviors are distinguished from non-moral wrongs by a higher degree of incivility. To test these hypotheses, in Study 1, we asked Chinese and Western participants to list examples of immoral behavior, and in Study 2, the most typical behaviors were presented to new participants who labeled them as either “Immoral,” “Wrong, but not immoral,” or “Not wrong at all.” Cultural differences in how often behaviors were called “immoral” are described. Finally, in Study 3, we asked participants to judge the harmfulness and incivility of the selected behaviors, and compared behaviors labeled “immoral” to those that were “wrong, but not immoral” to determine whether harmfulness or incivility better characterized the “immoral” category.

To ask participants for examples of what they label “immoral,” rather than asking them to respond to a theory-based definition of immorality, allows us to cast a wide net for moral concerns and may have the best chance of capturing unpredicted lay-cultural concepts. However, this means that the choice of equivalent words in Chinese and English is the definition of comparability. Translation of the key word “immoral” (“没道德/ mei dao de” or “不道德/ bu dao de”) was thus given special attention, translated first by the bilingual authors, and verified by reference to multiple dictionaries (e.g., "English-Chinese Dictionary," 1997; "Oxford Chinese Dictionary," 2010), and official usage (e.g. The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2006), or the Ministry of Education in Taiwan’s online bilingual glossary (2012), using the word “moral” (dao de) in the context of “moral education”). Additionally, we carried out a survey of naive bilingual informants: 47 bilingual Chinese undergraduate students (26 Mainland Chinese; 21 Hong Kong Chinese; 85% female) attending a university psychology course in Hong Kong were surveyed in two formats, open-ended (16 participants; “What is the Chinese translation for the English word “immoral?”) and closed-ended (31 participants; “What is a better Chinese translation for the English word

“immoral:” 不道德 or 邪恶的?”, with the second option being another common dictionary translation that can be also glossed as “evil”). In the open-ended format, 15 of the 16 participants wrote “不道德” (bu dao de) as the translation of “immoral” (the one exception wrote an idiosyncratic variation of “bu dao de” / 不道德). In the closed-ended format, 31 of the 31 participants chose “bu dao de” / 不道德. There were no differences between Mainland and Hong Kong Chinese.

Participants from a variety of English-speaking Western countries (Australia, Canada and USA) and culturally distinct areas of China (Beijing, Hong Kong and Shanghai) were recruited. *N*s were not pre-determined by power analysis; we attempted to reach around 100-200 participants per city / culture group, within practical limitations. In all studies, English was used for Western participants and Chinese for Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese participants. Translation of all materials was carried out by the first two authors (both English / Mandarin speakers) and trilingual (English, Cantonese, Mandarin<sup>1</sup>) research assistants, through backtranslation and discussion.

### Study 1: Examples of Immoral Behaviors

#### Method

**Participants.** Participants were university students born or resident for >7 years in Canada (Vancouver; *N* = 83, 23% male, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 22, 70 Caucasian; 6 East Asian; 7 Other), Australia (Melbourne; *N* = 88, 30% male, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 25; 79 Caucasian (including 26 “Australian”), 9 Other), Hong Kong SAR (*N* = 160, 35% male, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 22), or Mainland China (Shanghai, *N* = 182, 15% male, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 21, all born in Mainland China; and Beijing, *N* = 99, 54% male, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 22)<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mandarin and Cantonese are different spoken Chinese languages that use equivalent Chinese written characters.

<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity information was not collected for the Chinese samples in this study.

**Materials and Procedures.** Participants were asked to complete the sentence “That person is really immoral. For example, he/she...” / “这个人真没道德，比如说他/她。 。 。 ” by writing examples of behaviors. This brief question was placed as the last page of various unrelated questionnaires, the content of which were not predicted to affect answers.

**Coding.** After deleting 14 uninformative responses (e.g. “do/say something that is morally wrong”), 1,259 examples of immoral behaviors were coded into 46 categories developed through iterative discussions between the first author and trilingual research assistants. Examples were coded by two trilingual research assistants ( $\alpha = .87$ ), with disagreements resolved by discussion.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the most frequently mentioned categories from each of the five cities (for all 46 categories, see Table S1 in Supplemental Materials (full Table S1 excel file at <http://tinyurl.com/no5c6hj>)). While uncivil behaviors were frequently mentioned by Mainland Chinese, Western examples were more often of criminally harmful behavior. It is notable, for example, that “killing” was among the top 10 most frequently mentioned immoral behaviors by both Canadians and Australians, but almost never mentioned by Chinese participants; the converse applies to “spitting on the street” (see Table S1).

To illustrate cultural similarities and differences, Table 2 shows correlations across category frequency between the five cities. It should be noted that Hong Kong response patterns were significantly correlated with Western response patterns, although they were writing in Chinese in response to the same Chinese survey question as Mainland Chinese. This likely reflects the influence of Hong Kong’s bicultural heritage, especially in the realm of moral education (Cheng, 2004), and shows that the examples generated were not solely controlled by the specific translation used for “immoral” (see Bond & King, 1985).

### **Study 2: Explicit Categorization: Which Behaviors are Called “Immoral?”**

When Study 1 participants listed the first immoral behaviors to come to mind, results suggested that Westerners use the word “immoral” to describe behaviors that are more harmful than Chinese-listed behaviors (especially Mainland Chinese-listed). In Study 2, we sought to replicate this finding with a stronger test to see whether Chinese and Western cultural differences would persist even when exceptionally harmful behaviors were brought to mind. In Study 2 all participants were presented with the same list of behaviors, representing each of the most frequently mentioned behavior categories per city (Study 1), and asked whether or not these behaviors should be called “immoral.”

#### **Method**

**Participants.** Participants were university students who had been born or resident for more than 7 years in Canada (Vancouver, recruiting students who were born in Canada and whose first language was English;  $N = 123$ , 20% male,  $M_{age} = 21$ , all Caucasian), Australia (Melbourne, recruiting students of Western cultural background;  $N = 68$ , 32% male,  $M_{age} = 23$ , 63 Caucasian, 5 Other), Hong Kong SAR (recruiting Hong Kong permanent residents fluent in Chinese;  $N = 188$ ,<sup>3</sup> 41% male,  $M_{age} = 21$ , 181 ethnic Chinese, 1 Indian, 6 no ethnicity information), or Mainland China (Beijing,  $N = 101$ , 51% male,  $M_{age} = 22$ , all ethnic Chinese). Beijing participants were 87% non-religious and 8% Christian / Catholic, while Canadian, Australian, and Hong Kong participants were mostly non-religious (60%, 53%, and 67%, respectively) or Christian / Catholic (37%, 36%, and 29% respectively).

**Materials.** Twenty-six<sup>4</sup> behaviors were selected from Study 1 to represent the top 10 categories from any city or those that included 4% or more of examples within a city (a

---

<sup>3</sup> Due to a typo on one item, some Hong Kong participants read “To infringe on someone’s privacy, like secretly looking at a person” instead of “...looking at a person’s diary.” For that item, only data from the 86 Hong Kong participants who read “person’s diary” were included in analyses.

<sup>4</sup> A larger number (28) of commonly mentioned behaviors were originally presented in Studies 2 and 3, but upon further analysis of Study 1 it was found that two of the 28 behaviors did not reach the top 10 / above 4% criteria. Only the final 26 behavior list is analyzed here.

common cut-off point for prototype studies; see Table 1). The list was presented in the same order for all participants.

**Procedures.** Participants filled out a survey online (Canada, Australia, Hong Kong) or on paper in class (Beijing), for partial course credit (Canada, Beijing) or pay (Australia, \$10 AUD, about \$8 USD; Hong Kong, HKD\$50, about \$6.50 USD), in English (Canada, Australia) or Chinese (Hong Kong, Beijing). Participants read that the research concerned how people use the word, “immoral.” They were presented with the list of 26 behaviors and asked to select which category was the best description of each behavior: “Immoral” / “不道德的,” “Wrong, but immoral isn’t the best word” / “错的/不好的, 不过“不道德”一词并不贴切,” or “Not wrong at all” / “根本没有错.” This question was placed as the first page of a longer questionnaire.

## Results and Discussion

Australian and Canadian samples were combined to serve as a “Western” sample.<sup>5</sup> To test for cultural differences between Western, Hong Kong and Beijing samples in the use of the word, “immoral,” the cultural differences in the proportion of participants who chose “Immoral” were computed and confidence intervals calculated (as recommended by Newcombe & Altman (2000) and calculated with ESCI (Cummings, 2012)); see Table 3. Additionally,  $\chi^2$  tests of cultural differences in the proportion of participants who chose “Immoral” versus either of the other two categories (“Wrong, but immoral isn’t the best word” and “Not wrong at all” combined) were assessed for each of the 26 behaviors with a Bonferroni corrected p-value of  $0.05/26 = 0.0019$  for each culture pair (see Table 3 for effect size of the  $\chi^2$  tests (*phi*); see supplemental materials Table S2 for  $\chi^2$  values and exact p-values; full Table S2 excel file at <http://tinyurl.com/mrq2klk>).

---

<sup>5</sup> No behaviors were rated significantly differently by Canadian vs. Australian participants (9.2% average absolute-value difference; average difference *phi* = .11; see supplemental materials Table S2).

Overall cultural differences were similar to Study 1: Western and Beijing participants showed the largest differences (average absolute value % difference across the 26 behaviors = 26.0%, average 95% CIs  $\pm 10.7\%$ ; 15 behaviors were categorized significantly differently; average effect size  $\phi = 0.27$ ), while Hong Kong was in the middle, somewhat different from both Beijing (15.4% average absolute-value difference, average 95% CIs  $\pm 11.0\%$ ; 9 behaviors significantly different; average  $\phi = .16$ ) and Western participants (14.3% average absolute-value difference, average 95% CIs  $\pm 8.8\%$ ; 8 behaviors significantly different; average  $\phi = .16$ ), a moderate position which is consistent with its mixed Chinese/Western heritage (Cheng, 2004).

Again, the behaviors that were categorized most differently by Western and Beijing samples were characterized by extremes of harmfulness, as shown in Table 3. Behaviors such as spitting, cursing, and littering were more likely to be called immoral by Beijing than Western participants, while criminal behaviors such as killing, stealing, and hurting others were more likely to be called immoral by Western participants. For example, it is notable that while 70% of Beijing participants called *To spit on the public street* “immoral” (11% of Westerners), only 42% of Beijing participants called *To kill a person* “immoral” (81% of Westerners).<sup>6</sup>

### **Study 3: Are Immoral Behaviors Particularly Harmful, or Particularly Uncivilized?**

Studies 1 and 2 provide evidence of cultural differences in the behaviors that are most likely to be termed immoral, and suggest that the greatest cultural contrasts occur on behaviors that are very harmful (termed immoral by Westerners) versus uncivilized (termed immoral by Mainland Chinese). Perhaps for Westerners, immoral behaviors are typically seen to cause serious harm, while for Chinese, a different standard—such as incivility— may be used. However, alternative explanations exist; for example, perhaps Chinese are also

---

<sup>6</sup> To prevent misunderstanding, it is important to note that the other 58% of Beijing students labeled “killing” as “Wrong, but immoral isn’t the best word.” As mentioned in the introduction, these participants may consider killing to be within the legal rather than the moral realm; “too extreme” to be about morality.

considering harm; but they consider spitting or littering to be harmful to society as whole, and thus more serious than harm caused against individuals. Which is a more important element in Chinese judgments of immorality, incivility or harm?

In Study 3, we addressed this question explicitly by asking monocultural Chinese and American participants to rate both the harmfulness and incivility of behaviors, and then tested which (harm or incivility ratings) better differentiated behaviors called immoral from those that were called wrong for other reasons. We hypothesized that among Chinese, behaviors would be called immoral if they were judged as uncivilized, while harmfulness would not distinguish between the categories as well. For Americans, on the other hand, the immoral vs. wrong-but-not-immoral distinction should be driven more by perceptions of harmfulness than incivility.

## Method

**Participants.** Paid online participants from across the USA (paid \$1 USD) and Mainland China (paid 9 Chinese Yuan, about \$1 USD) were recruited through MTurk.com and SoJump.com, respectively, to fill out an online survey, and a university student sample from Beijing completed an on-paper survey for partial course credit. USA participants ( $N = 128$ , 53% male,  $M_{age} = 33$ ; 97 Caucasian, 7 African-American, 15 Asian, 7 Latino/a, 1 American Indian/Alaskan Native) were 52% non-religious, 42% Protestant or Catholic, and 6% other. Mainland China internet participants ( $N = 165$ , 33% male,  $M_{age} = 30$ , all Chinese) were 74% non-religious, 21% Buddhist, 3% Protestant or Catholic, and 3% other. Beijing university participants ( $N = 150$ , 30% male,  $M_{age} = 21$ , all Chinese) were 92% non-religious, 5% Buddhist, 1% Protestant or Catholic, and 2% other.<sup>7</sup>

**Materials.** Participants rated Study 2's 26 behaviors three times. As in Study 2, they first selected which word best described each behavior: "Immoral," "Wrong, but immoral

---

<sup>7</sup> Participants were excluded from analysis if they did not complete the survey ( $N = 3$  USA, 2 Beijing university students), if they had lived in their country for less than 7 years ( $N = 1$  USA), or if they showed no variation in their responses ( $N = 6$  USA, 2 Mainland China internet, 3 Beijing university).



isn't the best word," or "Not wrong at all." New to this study, they then rated each behavior on harmfulness (from 1 = "Extremely harmful" to 6 = "Not harmful at all") and incivility (from 1 = "Extremely uncivilized" to 6 = "Has nothing to do with being civilized or uncivilized").

## Results

**Categorizations and comparison to Study 2.** The two Chinese samples were combined,<sup>8</sup> and American / Chinese cultural differences in labeling behaviors as "immoral" or otherwise were tested as in Study 2 (see Table 3; see Table S2 for additional comparisons). Results replicated Study 2:<sup>9</sup> 16 behaviors were categorized significantly differently by American and Chinese participants (average absolute value % different = 27.1%, average 95% CIs  $\pm$  8.6%; average  $\phi$  = 0.25), and the largest cultural differences occurred for behaviors that seemed most and least harmful (e.g. spitting and killing).

### Does harm, or incivility, best differentiate between immoral vs. wrong behaviors?

#### Within-person ratings.

**Calculations.** Participants marked an average of 13.6 of the 26 behaviors as "Immoral" and 11.1 behaviors as "Wrong, but immoral isn't the right word" [henceforth "Wrong"]. To compare whether incivility or harmfulness best differentiated between these behavior categories, harmfulness and incivility ratings were reverse-coded for each item and two kinds of difference scores were calculated: For each participant the average harmfulness rating of behaviors that he/she had categorized as Wrong was subtracted from the average harmfulness rating of behaviors he/she had categorized as Immoral (harmfulness-difference), and the average incivility rating of Wrong behaviors was subtracted from the average incivility rating

---

<sup>8</sup> Only two behaviors were rated significantly differently by the Mainland China Internet sample and the Beijing university student sample (average % different = 9.0%, average  $\phi$  = .09; see Table S2).

<sup>9</sup> Study 2 and 3's categorization results were also similar within cultures (see supplemental materials Table S2): No behaviors were rated significantly differently by Study 2 Westerners and Study 3 USA participants (average % different = 6.2%, average  $\phi$  = .07), and only one behavior was rated significantly differently by Study 2 and Study 3 Mainland Chinese participants (average % different = 5.0%, average  $\phi$  = .04).

of Immoral behaviors (incivility-difference). Larger numbers indicate a larger difference between “immoral” and “wrong” categories on that criterion.

**Comparisons of the two behavior types.** Figure 1 shows that both Chinese and Americans rated “immoral” behaviors as both more harmful and more uncivil than “wrong” behaviors. However, as predicted, for Americans, the difference between immoral and wrong behaviors was greater on “harmfulness” than “incivility;” while for Chinese, the difference was greater on “incivility” than “harmfulness.” Specifically, a repeated-measures ANOVA of the difference between the Immoral and Wrong behaviors on harmfulness vs. incivility ratings (i.e. within-subjects ratings of harmfulness-difference and incivility-difference) from participant culture (China vs. West) resulted in a significant interaction,  $F(1, 459) = 90.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ , such that for Westerners the difference between Immoral vs. Wrong behaviors was larger in harmfulness ratings ( $M = 1.65, SD = .85$ ) than in incivility ratings ( $M = 0.69, SD = 1.19$ ); paired t-test  $M_{diff} = -.95 [-1.16, -.74], t(126) = -8.96, p < .001, d = .93$ , while for Chinese the incivility difference ( $M = 0.84, SD = 1.10$ ) was larger than the harmfulness difference ( $M = 0.36, SD = 1.22$ ); paired t-test  $M_{diff} = .48 [.31, .64], t(333) = 5.73, p < .001, d = .41$ . In other words, compared to other wrong behaviors, Chinese considered immoral behaviors to be better characterized by incivility than harmfulness.

**Does harm, or incivility, correlate with naming a behavior immoral? Within-culture average ratings.**

The above findings can be further illuminated by a correlational comparison across the 26 behaviors of how the cultural groups, on average, rate the behaviors (See Table 4). For each behavior we calculated the cultural group’s average incivility ratings and average harmfulness ratings, and correlated these with the percentage of participants within that cultural group who categorized the behavior as immoral. Correlations of these values across the 26 behaviors (see Table 4) re-illustrate the above findings: the percentage of Americans

who rated a behavior immoral was most highly correlated with the behaviors' average harmfulness ratings ( $r = .92$ , versus  $r = .75$  for incivility ratings), while the percentage of Chinese who rated a behavior immoral was most highly correlated with their average incivility ratings ( $r = .83$ , versus  $r = .27$  for harmfulness ratings). It is particularly informative to note that Chinese and Americans had quite high agreement on which behaviors were harmful ( $r = .80$ ), showing that the main cultural difference is in the definition of immorality, not harmfulness. In Table 5, which shows which behaviors were rated above-average on a given item, we can see that the Chinese immorality category includes both harmful and less harmful behaviors, and that some exceptionally harmful behaviors (killing, hurting others) are not rated as highly immoral; instead, immorality and incivility ratings are highly similar.

These findings support our hypothesis that the category of immoral behaviors is better characterized by incivility than harm for Chinese, while the opposite is true of Westerners.

### **General Discussion**

In the above three studies, we found that Western and Chinese participants use the word "immoral" quite differently. In both open-ended responses (Study 1) and ratings of layperson-generated examples (Studies 2 & 3), Mainland Chinese were more likely to describe uncivilized behaviors as "immoral" compared to harmful behaviors, while Westerners did the opposite. The replication of these differences across methods (open-ended and closed-ended) and samples (across student and internet-recruited samples; across different Western countries; across Mainland China) suggests that this finding is robust. Finally, the division between "immoral" and "otherwise wrong" behaviors was determined more by the behavior's harmfulness than its incivility for Americans, but for Mainland Chinese, the behavior's incivility was a better guide than its harmfulness. Responses of bicultural Hong Kong Chinese used the same Chinese word to describe behaviors called immoral by both Western and Mainland Chinese participants. This suggests that culturally

based differences in the conceptualization of morality, and not merely which language or Chinese word was used, affected participants' responses.

These studies indicate that while Western participants think of immorality as primarily about serious harm, Chinese participants are more likely to focus on the uncivilized nature of behaviors when making moral judgments. While the above data shows that harmful behaviors may be considered "wrong" by both Chinese and Americans, Mainland Chinese most typically use "immoral" to refer to incivility. The diversity in behaviors mentioned by Beijing and Shanghai participants in Study 1, especially compared to the similarity of behaviors mentioned by Canadian and Australian participants, can now be more easily understood: as civility requires cultured attention to the social situation, what is uncivilized in different social contexts may be more different than what is exceedingly harmful.

This evidence suggests that "moral" judgments cannot be described as universally and particularly characterized by the perception of harm and suffering (as suggested by Gray et al., 2014), and is more congruent with an interpretation of moral judgments' focal concerns being plural, and shifting as guided by culture (Graham et al., 2013). It is consistent with a description of Chinese morality as primarily a form of virtue ethics, in which immoral behaviors are those that show one's character to be insufficiently polished; criminal behaviors, on the other hand, are too extreme to be relevant to virtue (Bakken, 2000; A. H.-Y. Chen, 2011; Rosemont & Ames, 2009).

### **Three Interpretations, and Future Research Needed**

The Chinese and English concepts of "immoral" are obviously dissimilar, both in content (different specific behaviors described as "immoral") and in underlying concerns leading to the "immoral" label (harmful vs. uncivilized). Are they even the same concept at all? Despite the above documented agreement between Chinese dictionaries, sociologists, laypeople, and government bureaus that "immoral" is correctly translated to "bu daode," why

is this regarded as the correct translation? To answer this question, we may return to the “cognitive” and “functional” definitions of morality.

One interpretation is that the word “immoral” in Chinese, despite being different in content, still evokes the same cognitive consequences as the English word “immoral.” For example, it may be that among Chinese, moralized-uncivilized behaviors (in comparison to extremely harmful, or otherwise less moralized, behaviors) are more likely to be perceived as violating “sacred” values (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000), be universally and/or categorically impermissible (Miller et al., 1990; Turiel, 1983), result in social ostracism (Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008), and evoke emotional responses (Cannon, Schnall, & White, 2010; Haidt, 2007; Krebs, 2008). This would be consistent with Mainland China’s current and historical emphasis on the morality of personal cultivation and appropriate behavior (Cua, 2007; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2006) and with research showing that a sense of “moral conviction” predicts support for social ostracism similarly in Mainland China and the USA (assessed by using the same translation of “moral” as in this paper; Skitka et al., 2013), and may illuminate current conflicts within China, such as why anti-Mainland Chinese sentiment in Hong Kong focuses on the perceived “uncivilized behavior” of Mainland Chinese tourists (Luo, 2014, para. 23; see also T.-P. Chen, 2014; Yung, 2014). And yet it seems strange if, for example, a murderer would be less socially ostracized than someone who spits on the street. More research is needed to assess the similarity in cognition around moral judgment in Chinese and English, especially if Western definitions of “moral cognition” are based in deontological perspectives.

It also difficult to fit the seeming overlap between “moral” and “conventional” norms in Chinese (and the peripheralisation of some very harmful behaviors within the “immoral” category) into some definitions of the evolutionary and social function of moral norms, especially those that prioritize the prosocial function of morality as its special characteristic.

Even if killing is peripheralized as a moral concern, Chinese society does not permit random murders, as evidenced by the serious “social sanction” of the death penalty. But norms against criminal behavior are apparently not strongly relevant to *moral* norms in Chinese; instead, the realm of law is seen as more appropriate for preventing and punishing crimes. This leads to the difficult question about the social function of morality: if anti-social behavior such as murder is not centrally immoral, and yet is impermissible and sanctioned by another form of social regulation (law), does it make sense to define morality as uniquely fulfilling the function of promoting prosocial, cooperative behavior (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010)?

This leads us to one more final implication: that Chinese may not categorize social norms in the same way as Westerners, and thus that a universally identifiable “moral” category of norms may in fact not exist at all (Machery & Mallon, 2010). How many aspects of the “moral cognition” that has been documented in Western societies, where harm is a central reference point for moral judgments, can generalize to a culture where harm is not a central focus of moral judgments? If cultivated propriety is central to moral character in Chinese culture, can moral cognition still look the same? Especially if Chinese prohibitions are divided into “criminal” and “immoral,” this suggests that it might be more scientifically accurate to divide social and moral norms into a multitude of categories, characterized by different kinds of central concerns, cognitions, emotions, and social consequences (Sachdeva et al., 2011; Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2013)? If we wish to “carve nature at the joints,” it may be that the joints in social norms are different in China than they are in the USA; and if the joints are placed differently, so may be the cognitive ligaments and social-structural bones that support them.

The conceptual divide of social rules into “moral” (absolutely required) and “conventional” (permissible depending on social context) may be an accident of Western

culture and philosophy, not a universal.<sup>10</sup> Is there anything universal about the cognition that arises when we call something a “moral” issue? More research is needed on the cognitive consequences of such lay natural-language differences, especially in multi-lingual contexts such as Hong Kong (Bond, 1983; S. X. Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Ng, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

A Chinese lay concept of “immorality” that is more applicable to spitting on the street than killing people has implications for how we define and study moral norms. Studies of moral cognition that use harmful and unjust behavior as stimuli (such as the classic “trolley problem”) may be inappropriately influenced by Western lay instincts about morality, and theories about the unique evolutionary and social purposes of moral cognition may need to encompass moral systems in which behaviors acknowledged to be exceptionally destructive are relatively peripheral to morality. Finally, the potential of differently “jointed” categories of social norms in Chinese and English suggests that more research is needed to define how or whether “moral cognition” is universally distinctive from “norm cognition” in general (Machery & Mallon, 2010; Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2013; Sripada & Stich, 2007).

---

<sup>10</sup> Sachdeva, Singh, & Medin (2011) also suggest that Hindi’s closest translation for “morality” is similar to “social norms” (p. 174).

### References

- Angle, S., & Slote, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Virtue ethics and Confucianism*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Bakken, B. (2000). *The exemplary society: Human improvement, social control, and the dangers of modernity in China*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Bond, M. H. (1983). How language variation affects inter-cultural differentiation of values by Hong Kong bilinguals. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 2(1), 57-66.
- Bond, M. H., & King, A. Y. C. (1985). Coping with the threat of westernization in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 9(4), 351-364.
- Cannon, P. R., Schnall, S., & White, M. (2010). Transgressions and expressions: Affective facial muscle activity predicts moral judgments. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2(3), 325-331. doi: 10.1177/1948550610390525
- Chen, A. H.-Y. (2011). *An introduction to the legal system of the PRC*. Hong Kong, China: Lexis/Nexis.
- Chen, S. X., Benet-Martínez, V., & Ng, J. C. K. (2014). Does language affect personality perception? A functional approach to testing the Whorfian hypothesis. *Journal of Personality*, 82(2), 130-143.
- Chen, T.-P. (2014, April 23). Hong Kong howls, but 88% of Mainland Chinese don't mind public urination. *Wall Street Journal: China Real Time Report*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/04/23/hong-kong-howls-but-88-of-mainland-chinese-dont-mind-public-urination/>
- Cheng, R. (2004). Moral education in Hong Kong: Confucian-parental, Christian-religious and liberal-civic influences. *Journal of Moral Education*, 33(4), 533-551. doi: 10.1080/0305724042000315626



- Chiswick, B. R., & Miller, P. W. (2005). Linguistic distance: A quantitative measure of the distance between English and other languages. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 26(1), 1-11. doi: 10.1080/14790710508668395
- Chiu, C. Y., Dweck, C. S., Tong, J. Y.-y., & Fu, J. H.-y. (1997). Implicit theories and conceptions of morality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(5), 923-940.
- Cua, A. S. (2007). Virtues of *Junzi*. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 34(Supplement s1), 125-142. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6253.2007.00456.x
- Cummings, G. (2012). Exploratory software for confidence intervals. Retrieved from <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/psy/research/cognitive-and-developmental-psychology/esci>
- DeScioli, P., & Kurzban, R. (2013). A solution to the mysteries of morality. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139(2), 477-496. doi: 10.1037/a0029065
- Dworkin, R. (1978). *Taking rights seriously*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- English-Chinese Dictionary. (1997). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Fehr, B. (1988). Prototype analysis of the concepts of love and commitment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55(4), 557-579.
- Fingarette, H. (1972). *Confucius: The secular as sacred*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Fontaine, J. R. J., Poortinga, Y. H., Setiadi, B., & Markam, S. S. (2002). Cognitive structure of emotion terms in Indonesia and The Netherlands. *Cognition & Emotion*, 16(1), 61-86. doi: 10.1080/02699933014000130
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P., & Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 47, 55-130. doi: 10.1016/b978-0-12-407236-7.00002-4

- Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101*(2), 366-385. doi: 10.1037/a0021847
- Gray, K., Schein, C., & Ward, A. F. (2014). The myth of harmless wrongs in moral cognition: Automatic dyadic completion from sin to suffering. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143*(4), 1600-1615.
- Gray, K., Young, L., & Waytz, A. (2012). Mind perception is the essence of morality. *Psychological Inquiry, 23*(2), 101-124. doi: 10.1080/1047840X.2012.651387
- Haidt, J. (2007). The new synthesis in moral psychology. *Science, 316*(5827), 998-1002. doi: 10.1126/science.1137651
- Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2009). Planet of the Durkheimians, where community, authority, and sacredness are foundations of morality. In J. T. Jost, A. C. Kay & H. Thorisdottir (Eds.), *Social and psychological bases of ideology and system justification* (pp. 371-401). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Haidt, J., & Joseph, C. (2007). The moral mind: How 5 sets of innate intuitions guide the development of many culture-specific virtues, and perhaps even modules. In P. Carruthers, S. Laurence & S. Stich (Eds.), *The innate mind* (Vol. 3, pp. 367-391). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Haidt, J., & Kesebir, S. (2010). Morality. In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, G. Lindzey, S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology, Vol 2 (5th ed.)*. (pp. 797-832). Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Haste, H. (2013). Deconstructing the elephant and the flag in the lavatory: promises and problems of moral foundations research. *Journal of Moral Education, 42*(3), 316-329. doi: 10.1080/03057240.2013.818529

- Heine, S. J., & Buchtel, E. E. (2009). Personality: The universal and the culturally specific. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *60*, 369-394.
- Hursthouse, R. (2013). Virtue ethics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Fall 2013 edition).  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/>.
- Hwang, K.-K. (2012). *Foundations of Chinese psychology: Confucian social relations*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Janoff-Bulman, R., & Carnes, N. C. (2013). Moral context matters: a reply to Graham. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *17*(3), 242-247. doi: 10.1177/1088868313492021
- Kearns, J. N., & Fincham, F. D. (2004). A prototype analysis of forgiveness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *30*(7), 838-855. doi: 10.1177/0146167204264237
- Kesebir, P., & Pyszczynski, T. (2011). A moral - existential account of the psychological factors fostering intergroup conflict. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *5*(11), 878-890. doi: 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2011.00397.x
- Krebs, D. L. (2008). Morality: An evolutionary account. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *3*(3), 149-172. doi: 10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00072.x
- Li, P., Zhong, M., Lin, B., & Zhang, H. (2004). Deyu as moral education in modern China: ideological functions and transformations. *Journal of Moral Education*, *33*(4), 449-464. doi: 10.1080/0305724042000315581
- Luo, C. (2014, April 22). Hongkongers clash with mainland parents after toddler urinates in Mong Kok street. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from Retrieved from <http://www.scmp.com>
- Machery, E., & Mallon, R. (2010). Evolution of morality. In J. M. Doris (Ed.), *The moral psychology handbook* (pp. 3-46). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Miller, J. G., & Bersoff, D. M. (1994). Cultural influences on the moral status of reciprocity and the discounting of endogenous motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(5), 592-602.
- Miller, J. G., Bersoff, D. M., & Harwood, R. L. (1990). Perceptions of social responsibilities in India and in the United States: Moral imperatives or personal decisions? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(1), 33-47.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2006). Regulations on primary and secondary school moral education work (M. Qiang and G. P. Fairbrother, Trans.). *Chinese Education and Society*, 39(2), 37-43.
- Ministry of Education Republic of China (Taiwan). (2012). Bilingual Glossary. Retrieved April 20, 2015, 2015
- Monin, B., Pizarro, D. A., & Beer, J. S. (2007). Deciding versus reacting: Conceptions of moral judgment and the reason-affect debate. *Review of General Psychology*, 11(2), 99-111. doi: 10.1037/1089-2680.11.2.99
- Newcombe, R. G., & Altman, D. G. (2000). Proportions and their difference. In D. G. Altman, D. Machin, T. N. Bryant & M. J. Gardner (Eds.), *Statistics with confidence* (2nd ed., pp. 45-56). London, England: BMJ Books.
- Oxford Chinese Dictionary. (2010). New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
- Park, C. L., Edmondson, D., & Hale-Smith, A. (2013). Why religion? Meaning as motivation. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, J. W. Jones, K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline & J. W. Jones (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality (Vol 1): Context, theory, and research*. (pp. 157-171). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

- Rai, T. S., & Fiske, A. P. (2011). Moral psychology is relationship regulation: Moral motives for unity, hierarchy, equality, and proportionality. *Psychological Review*, *118*(1), 57-75. doi: 10.1037/a0021867
- Reed, G. G. (1995). Moral/political education in the P.R.C.: Learning through role models. *Journal of Moral Education*, *24*(2), 99-111.
- Rosch, E. (1975). Cognitive representations of semantic categories. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *104*(3), 192-233. doi: 10.1037/0096-3445.104.3.192
- Rosemont, H., Jr., & Ames, R. T. (2008). Family reverence (*xiao*) as the source of consummatory conduct (*ren*). *Dao*, *7*, 9-19. doi: 10.1007/s11712-008-9035-3
- Rosemont, H., Jr., & Ames, R. T. (2009). *The Chinese classic of family reverence: A philosophical translation of the Xiaojing*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Rozman, E. B., Leeman, R. F., & Baron, J. (2009). Unsentimental ethics: Towards a content-specific account of the moral-conventional distinction. *Cognition*, *112*(1), 159-174. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2009.04.004
- Rozin, P. (1999). The process of moralization. *Psychological Science*, *10*(3), 218.
- Sachdeva, S., Singh, P., & Medin, D. (2011). Culture and the quest for universal principles in moral reasoning. *International Journal of Psychology*, *46*(3), 161-176. doi: 10.1080/00207594.2011.568486
- Sarkissian, H. (2014). Ritual and rightness in the *Analects*. In A. Olberding (Ed.), *Dao companion to the Analects*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Shweder, R. A. (1990). In defense of moral realism: Reply to Gabennesch. *Child Development*, *61*(6), 2060-2067. doi: 10.2307/1130859
- Shweder, R. A., Mahapatra, M., & Miller, J. G. (1987). Culture and moral development. In J. Kagan & S. Lamb (Eds.), *The emergence of morality in young children* (pp. 1-83). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Shweder, R. A., Much, N. C., Mahapatra, M., & Park, L. (1997). The "big three" of morality (autonomy, community, and divinity), and the "big three" explanations of suffering. In A. Brandt & P. Rozin (Eds.), *Morality and health* (pp. 119-169). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W., & Wheatley, T. (2013). Are moral judgments unified? *Philosophical Psychology*, 27(4), 451-474. doi: 10.1080/09515089.2012.736075
- Skitka, L. J. (2010). The psychology of moral conviction. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4(4), 267-281.
- Skitka, L. J., Bauman, C. W., & Sargis, E. G. (2005). Moral conviction: Another contributor to attitude strength or something more? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(6), 895-917. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.88.6.895
- Skitka, L. J., Liu, J. H.-f., Yang, Y., Chen, H., Liu, L., & Xu, L. (2013). Exploring the cross-cultural generalizability and scope of morally motivated intolerance. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 4(3), 324-331. doi: 10.1177/1948550612456404
- Smith, K. D., Smith, S. T., & Christopher, J. C. (2007). What defines the good person? Cross-cultural comparisons of experts' models with lay prototypes. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 38(3), 333-360. doi: 10.1177/0022022107300279
- Sripada, C. S., & Stich, S. (2007). A framework for the psychology of norms. In P. Carruthers, S. Laurence & S. Stich (Eds.), *The innate mind Volume 2: Culture and cognition*. (pp. 280-301). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Tetlock, P. E., Kristel, O. V., Elson, S. B., Green, M. C., & Lerner, J. S. (2000). The psychology of the unthinkable: Taboo trade-offs, forbidden base rates, and heretical counterfactuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(5), 853-870. doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.78.5.853

- Turiel, E. (1983). *The development of social knowledge : Morality and convention*.  
Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Turiel, E., Killen, M., & Helwig, C. (1987). Morality: Its structure, functions, and vagarities.  
In J. Kagan & S. Lamb (Eds.), *The emergence of morality in young children* (pp. 155-244). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- van den Bos, K. (2009). Making sense of life: The existential self trying to deal with personal uncertainty. *Psychological Inquiry*, 20(4), 197-217. doi: 10.1080/10478400903333411
- Walker, L. J., & Pitts, R. C. (1998). Naturalistic conceptions of moral maturity. *Developmental Psychology*, 34(3), 403-419. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.34.3.403
- Wong, D. B. (2013). Chinese ethics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2013 edition).  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/ethics-chinese/>.
- Wong, D. B. (2014). Cultivating the self in concert with others. In A. Olberding (Ed.), *Dao companion to the Analects* (pp. 171-197). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Wright, J. C., Cullum, J., & Schwab, N. (2008). The cognitive and affective dimensions of moral conviction: Implications for attitudinal and behavioral measures of interpersonal tolerance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(11), 1461-1476. doi: 10.1177/0146167208322557
- Yang, Y. (2009). Guanxilization or categorization: Psychological mechanisms contributing to the formation of the Chinese concept of "us". *Social Sciences in China English Edition*, 30(2), 49-67.
- Yung, C. (2014, May 12). State media advises Chinese tourists in Hong Kong: Don't talk so loud. *Wall Street Journal: China Real Time*. Retrieved from

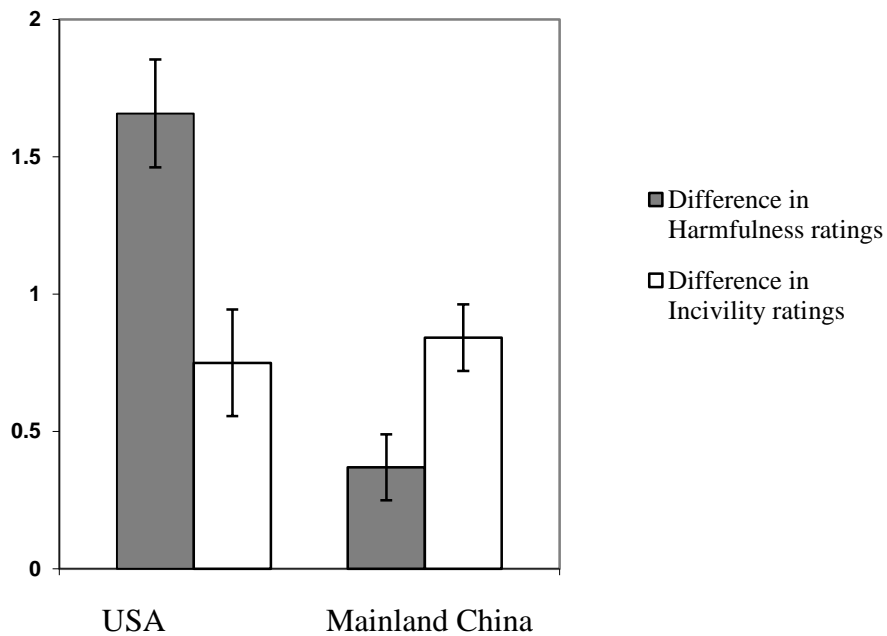
<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/05/12/state-media-advises-chinese-tourists-in-hong-kong-dont-talk-so-loud/>

Zhan, W., & Ning, W. (2004). The moral education curriculum for junior high schools in 21st century China. *Journal of Moral Education*, 33(4), 511-532. doi: 10.1080/0305724042000327993



Figure 1

*Study 3: Immoral vs. Wrong: Mean difference between behaviors called “Immoral” vs. those that were “Wrong, but immoral isn’t the right word” on harmfulness and incivility ratings.*



*Note.* Error bars = 95% CI. Taller bars indicate greater ratings of “Immoral” behaviors on harmfulness [incivility] relative to behaviors categorized “Wrong, but immoral isn’t the right word.”

Table 1

*Study 1: Top 10 most frequently mentioned behavior categories (by percentage of examples per city).*

<b>City source</b>	<b>Categories</b>
Vancouver (119 examples)	Stealing (18%), Harming others (11%), Going against or not having a conscience / principles (10%), Lying / deceiving others (9%), Killing (8%), Adultery/ two-timing (8%), Racist / intolerant (6%), Unkind, inconsiderate, uncaring (4%), Sexual promiscuity or indecency (3%), Benefitting self at the expense of others (3%)
Melbourne (255 examples)	Stealing (14%), Harming others (10%), Adultery/ two-timing (8%), Lying / deceiving others (7%), Sexual promiscuity or indecency (7%) Unkind, inconsiderate, uncaring (6%), Breaking laws / regulations / rules of public civility (4%), Racist / intolerant (4%), Cheating on exam or competition (4%), Killing (4%), Benefitting self at the expense of others (4%)
Hong Kong (278 examples)	Sexual promiscuity or indecency (18%), Lying / deceiving others (8%), Stealing (8%), Invading others' privacy (6%), Adultery / two-timing (5%), Spitting on the street (4%), Harming others (4%), Harming others to benefit self (4%), Corruption / bribing (3%), Breaking laws / regulations / rules of public civility (3%)
Shanghai (327 examples)	Littering (8%), Spitting on street (7%), Stealing (6%), Breaking laws / regulations / rules of public civility (6%), Swearing (5%), Not giving up seat on bus (5%), Being unfilial (4%), Being selfish (4%), Unkind, inconsiderate, uncaring (4%), Lying / deceiving others (3%)
Beijing (280 examples)	Being unfilial (6%), Breaking laws / regulations / rules of public civility (6%), Betraying / selling-out others (6%), Adultery/ two-timing (6%), Irresponsible, don't keep promises, unpunctual (5%), Harming others to benefit self (5%), Stealing (5%), Being selfish (5%), Back-stabbing (4%), Lying / deceiving others (4%), Talking loudly (4%)

Table 2

*Study 1: Correlations of category frequency between cities across 46 categories*

	Melbourne	Hong Kong	Shanghai	Beijing
Vancouver	.89** [.81, .94]	.40* [.12, .62]	.07 [-.23, .35]	.17 [-.13, .44]
Melbourne	--	.58** [.35, .75]	.08 [-.22, .36]	.26 [-.03, .51]
Hong Kong	--	--	.15 [-.15, .42]	.22 [-.08, .48]
Shanghai	--	--	--	.46** [.26, .66]

*Note:* Numbers in brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

\* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3

*Studies 2 and 3: Categorization of behaviors as “immoral;” percentages and cultural comparisons.*

Behavior items	% of participants who selected “immoral”					Cultural differences in % of participants who selected “immoral” (vs. any other category)							
	Study 2: Western	Study 2: Hong Kong	Study 2: Beijing	Study 3: USA	Study 3: Mainland China	Study 2: Western-Beijing N = 290-292		Study 2: Western-HK N = 376-379 <sup>c</sup>		Study 2: Hong Kong-Beijing N = 287-289 <sup>d</sup>		Study 3: USA-Mainland China N = 460-463	
						% Difference [CI]	<i>phi</i>	% Difference [CI]	<i>phi</i>	% Difference [CI]	<i>phi</i>	% Difference [CI]	<i>phi</i>
26. To spit on the public street.	11% <sup>a</sup>	42% <sup>a</sup>	70%	7% <sup>a</sup>	70%	-59.8 [-48.9, -68.6]	0.61*	-31.5 [-22.9, -39.5]	0.36*	-28.3 [-16.4, -38.8]	0.27*	-63.4 [-55.7, -69.1]	0.57*
20. To swear and curse loudly in public.	16% <sup>a</sup>	35% <sup>a</sup>	75%	11% <sup>a</sup>	68%	-59.5 [-48.6, -68.2]	0.59*	-19.4 [-10.7, -27.8]	0.22*	-40.1 [-28.5, -50]	0.38*	-56.7 [-48.3, -63.2]	0.51*
4. To talk and laugh loudly in a public place.	2% <sup>b</sup>	14% <sup>a</sup>	60%	5% <sup>b</sup>	44% <sup>a</sup>	-57.9 [-47.6, -67.1]	0.66*	-11.7 [-6.5, -17.5]	0.22*	-46.2 [-34.9, -56.2]	0.48*	-39.7 [-32.3, -45.7]	0.38*
17. To litter.	20% <sup>a</sup>	35% <sup>a</sup>	67%	14% <sup>a</sup>	64%	-47.3 [-35.8, -57.1]	0.47*	-14.6 [-5.6, -23.3]	0.16	-32.8 [-20.8, -43.3]	0.31*	-49.8 [-40.8, -56.9]	0.44*
8. To be disrespectful to your parents.	30% <sup>a</sup>	59%	74%	24%	76%	-43.9 [-32.3, -53.6]	0.42*	-28.7 [-18.8, -37.8]	0.29*	-15.2 [-3.7, -25.6]	0.15	-51.3 [-41.8, -59.2]	0.47*
16. To talk behind someone's back.	26% <sup>a</sup>	46%	69%	12% <sup>a</sup>	63%	-43.7 [-32, -53.6]	0.42*	-19.8 [-10.2, -28.9]	0.21*	-23.9 [-11.9, -34.6]	0.23*	-51.3 [-42.7, -58]	0.46*
19. To have casual sex with many people.	17% <sup>b</sup>	76%	64%	23% <sup>b</sup>	62%	-47.2 [-35.8, -57.1]	0.48*	-58.8 [-49.9, -66]	0.59*	11.5 [22.8, 0.6]	0.12	-38.4 [-28.7, -46.6]	0.34*
6. To not give up your seat to the elderly on public transport.	28% <sup>a</sup>	38% <sup>a</sup>	69%	15% <sup>a</sup>	58%	-41.0 [-29.3, -51.1]	0.39*	-9.5 [0, -18.7]	0.10	-31.5 [-19.6, -42]	0.30*	-42.7 [-33.7, -50]	0.38*
1. To kill a person.	81%	75%	42% <sup>a</sup>	90%	52%	39.5 [49.8, 27.9]	0.40*	6.1 [14.3, -2.3]	0.07	33.4 [44.2, 21.6]	0.33	37.9 [44.7, 29.6]	0.35*
12. To infringe on someone's privacy, like reading their diary without permission.	63%	81%	83%	48% <sup>a</sup>	80%	-20.0 [-9.3, -29.3]	0.21*	-18.2 [-6.7, -28]	0.18	-1.8 [9.1, -13]	0.02	-31.6 [-21.8, -40.9]	0.31*
28. To lack values that guide your own behavior.	45%	28% <sup>a</sup>	13% <sup>a</sup>	34% <sup>a</sup>	19% <sup>a</sup>	32.4 [41.2, 21.9]	0.33*	17.3 [26.6, 7.6]	0.18*	15.1 [23.7, 5.2]	0.17	15.4 [24.7, 6.5]	0.19*
22. To intentionally cause harm to someone for your own gain.	85%	68%	62%	89%	65%	22.4 [33.1, 11.8]	0.25*	16.7 [24.9, 8.1]	0.20*	5.7 [17.3, -5.5]	0.06	24.6 [31.4, 16.4]	0.24*
7. To steal someone's belongings.	83%	72%	56%	82%	61%	26.3 [37.1, 15.3]	0.28*	10.4 [18.6, 2]	0.12	15.9 [27.3, 4.4]	0.16	21.4 [29.2, 12.3]	0.20*
18. To intentionally hurt another person.	76%	65%	55%	81%	56%	20.9 [32, 9.5]	0.21*	11.4 [20.4, 2.2]	0.13	9.4 [21.1, -2.2]	0.09	24.2 [32.2, 14.9]	0.22*
10. To shirk one's responsibilities and obligations.	24% <sup>a</sup>	33% <sup>a</sup>	40% <sup>a</sup>	18% <sup>a</sup>	46% <sup>a</sup>	-15.5 [-4.4, -26.7]	0.16	-9.1 [0, -18]	0.10	-6.4 [5, -18.1]	0.06	-27.5 [-18.3, -35.4]	0.25*

2. To engage in corruption and bribery	84%	87%	66%	80%	65%	17.4 [28.1, 7.1]	0.20*	-3.4 [3.8, -10.5]	0.05	20.8 [31.3, 10.7]	0.25*	14.6 [22.6, 5.4]	0.14
27. To be inconsiderate of others' feelings.	26% <sup>a</sup>	29% <sup>a</sup>	33% <sup>a</sup>	13% <sup>a</sup>	38% <sup>a</sup>	-6.9 [3.8, -18.1]	0.07	-2.9 [6, -11.8]	0.03	-3.9 [6.9, -15.3]	0.04	-24.6 [-16, -31.8]	0.24*
15. To go against the laws of your government.	27% <sup>a</sup>	38% <sup>a</sup>	15% <sup>a</sup>	21% <sup>a</sup>	35% <sup>a</sup>	11.9 [20.6, 1.8]	0.13	-11.1 [-1.7, -20.2]	0.12	22.9 [32, 12.4]	0.24*	-13.8 [-4.6, -21.9]	0.13
23. To sell out (betray) your own friend.	68%	80%	79%	67%	80%	-11.7 [-8, -21.4]	0.12	-12.2 [-3.4, -20.9]	0.14	0.6 [10.9, -8.7]	0.01	-12.8 [-3.9, -22.2]	0.13
14. To act selfishly, only care about self-interest.	27% <sup>a</sup>	34% <sup>a</sup>	40% <sup>a</sup>	28% <sup>a</sup>	40% <sup>a</sup>	-12.4 [-1.2, -23.7]	0.13	-7 [2.3, -16.1]	0.08	-5.4 [6, -17.1]	0.05	-11.4 [-1.5, -20.2]	0.11
9. To lie about things that are important.	58%	44% <sup>a</sup>	47% <sup>a</sup>	54%	46% <sup>a</sup>	10.6 [22.3, -1.4]	0.10	14 [23.6, 3.9]	0.14	-3.4 [8.5, -15.3]	0.03	7.7 [17.7, -2.4]	0.07
21. To be prejudiced against someone because of his ethnicity.	65%	54%	55%	61%	53%	10.5 [22.1, -1.2]	0.10	11.2 [20.8, 1.3]	0.11	-0.7 [11.2, -12.5]	0.01	7.5 [17.1, -2.6]	0.07
25. To cheat on a final exam for class.	61%	49% <sup>a</sup>	53%	54%	45% <sup>a</sup>	8.8 [20.5, -3]	0.08	12.3 [22, 2.3]	0.12	-3.5 [8.4, -15.3]	0.03	9.4 [19.3, -0.7]	0.08
5. To cheat on your spouse.	83%	92%	79%	83%	74%	3.6 [13.8, -5.5]	0.04	-8.9 [-2.1, -15.7]	0.13	12.5 [22, 4.1]	0.18	8.4 [15.9, -0.3]	0.09
3. To be hypocritical or two-faced, fake	35% <sup>a</sup>	40% <sup>a</sup>	34% <sup>a</sup>	29% <sup>a</sup>	40% <sup>a</sup>	1.6 [12.6, -10]	0.02	-4.6 [5.1, -14.2]	0.05	6.2 [17.3, -5.5]	0.06	-10.9 [-1, -19.8]	0.10
11. To take advantage of someone in order to better yourself.	68%	67%	63%	58%	65%	4.5 [16.1, -6.7]	0.05	0.5 [9.9, -8.9]	0.01	4.0 [15.7, -7.2]	0.04	-7.2 [2.6, -17.1]	0.07

*Note.* Behaviors ordered from largest to smallest average Western-Mainland China differences (average *phi* of studies 2 and 3). CIs are 95% confidence intervals.

\*  $p < 0.0019$ ; exact value, 2-sided (see online supplementary Table S2 for  $\chi^2$  values)

<sup>a</sup> The most frequent category was “Wrong, but immoral isn’t the right word.”

<sup>b</sup> The most frequent category was “Not wrong at all.”

<sup>c</sup> For “12 To infringe...”,  $N = 276$  (see footnote 2).

<sup>d</sup> For “12 To infringe...”,  $N = 187$  (see footnote 2).

Table 4

*Study 3: Correlations of within-culture average ratings across 26 behaviors*

	USA Harmful	USA Uncivilized	China % Immoral	China Harmful	China Uncivilized
USA % Immoral	.92** [.83, .97]	.75** [.51, .88]	.24 [-.17, .57]	.77** [.55, .89]	-.02 [-.41, .37]
USA Harmful ratings	--	.80** [.60, .91]	.07 [-.33, .44]	.80** [.60, .91]	-.09 [-.46, .31]
USA Uncivilized ratings	--	--	.14 [-.26, .50]	.65** [.35, .83]	.14 [-.26, .50]
China % immoral	--	--	--	.27 [-.13, .60]	.83** [.65, .92]
China Harmful ratings					.15 [-.25, .51]

*Note:* Numbers in brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

\* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 5

*Study 3: Within-culture average ratings of behaviors. Sorted by USA Harmfulness ratings; above-average ratings shaded.*

Behavior items	USA % Immoral	USA Harmful	USA Uncivilized	China % Immoral	China Harmful	China Uncivilized
1. To kill a person.	90	5.97	5.02	52	5.86	3.95
7. To steal someone's belongings.	89	5.04	4.27	65	4.68	3.87
18. To intentionally hurt another person.	81	5	4.45	56	5.08	3.9
11. To take advantage of someone in order to better yourself.	83	4.89	3.81	74	4.46	3.98
22. To intentionally cause harm to someone for your own gain.	80	4.7	3.92	65	5.32	3.93
23. To sell out (betray) your own friend.	67	4.4	3.97	80	4.74	4.04
5. To cheat on your spouse.	82	4.38	4.25	61	4.88	3.94
12. To infringe on someone's privacy, like reading their diary without permission.	61	4.35	4.66	53	4.12	4.2
28. To lack values that guide your own behavior.	58	4.17	3.8	65	4.14	3.66
10. To shirk one's responsibilities and obligations.	54	3.98	3.29	46	3.87	3.45
27. To be inconsiderate of others' feelings.	34	3.69	3.69	19	3.56	2.76
3. To be hypocritical or two-faced, fake	48	3.65	3.86	80	3.95	4.25
2. To engage in corruption and bribery	21	3.63	3.53	35	4.76	3.53
16. To talk behind someone's back.	29	3.4	3.22	40	3.53	3.3
15. To go against the laws of your government.	18	3.37	3.39	46	4	3.4
14. To act selfishly, only care about self-interest.	54	3.35	3.32	45	3.56	3.32
8. To be disrespectful to your parents.	28	3.33	3.63	40	3.56	3.35
21. To be prejudiced against someone because of his ethnicity.	24	3.16	3.56	76	4.61	4.48
6. To not give up your seat to the elderly on public transport.	13	3.02	3.37	38	3.43	3.32
20. To swear and curse loudly in public.	12	2.79	3.05	63	3.31	3.91
19. To have casual sex with many people.	14	2.76	3.63	64	3.33	4.32
26. To spit on the public street.	15	2.64	3.83	58	3.1	3.93
9. To lie about things that are important.	23	2.36	2.66	62	4.33	4.08
25. To cheat on a final exam for class.	11	2.1	3.35	68	3.57	4.64
17. To litter.	7	1.69	3.32	70	3.49	4.5

---

4. To talk and laugh loudly in a public place.	5	1.63	3.09	44	2.79	3.9
Average:	42.35	3.59	3.69	56.35	4.08	3.84

---